Free market of desire

Free Market of Desire: Libidinal Economy and the Rationalization of Sex

in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*

Abstract

This article reads Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) as resonating with current theoretical discourses on accelerationism, reflecting a contemporaneity with writers said to be its points of origin: French theorists of libidinal economy writing in the early 1970s, especially Jean-François Lyotard. Considering the novel in the context of Carter's work of this period, I argue that *Infernal Desire Machines* registers a shift in governmental and economic policy from the organized welfare statism of the postwar years to a society that resembles the neoliberal state Britain will become under Thatcher, prefigured in the novel as a kind of libidinal economy; for, in *Infernal Desire Machines*, this tension is worked out on the planes of sexuality and desire and the regulation thereof.

In their 2013 manifesto for an accelerationist politics, Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek press for a politics of the Left 'at ease with a modernity of abstraction complexity, globality, and technology.' They resist folk-political movements, the so-called Slow Media revolution, and stress the need for speed. In 2014, Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian published an *Accelerationist Reader*, writing to the currency of accelerationist politics in theory today and to its place in a longer genealogy, the roots of which they locate in ostensibly Left-wing responses to the outcomes of May 1968. Mackay and Avanessian, as well as David Bennett and Benjamin Noys, point to the theoretical moment of "libidinal economy" – France in the early- to mid-1970s – as one of accelerationism's points of origin, manifested in the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard and, particularly, Jean-François Lyotard. Libidinal economy pairs desire and currency and insists upon the uninhibited and rapid circulation of both in order to bring about some unimaginable societal transformation. If contemporary manifestoes for and critiques of accelerationism look to this moment as a point of origin, they seem to have overlooked another writer of the period whose work resonates with the moment of libidinal economy. Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) is, like all of her writing, unbelievably prescient. The novel's contemporaneity with libidinal economy and accelerationism – and indeed the current significance of these theoretical trends – call for its being reread. While writers like Noys critique acceleration for effectively cheerleading for neoliberalism, Carter's novel provides another perspective, offering a gendered critique.

This article situates Carter's novel at a crucial historical juncture: the end of the post-war social consensus and the beginnings of neo-liberalism, recasting the two

regimes at the novel's heart – that of the Minister and of Doctor Hoffman – as standing on either side of this political landscape. This sort of dialectical composition characterises two of Carter's other novels of this period, namely *Heroes and Villains* (1969), in which we find the Professors barricaded against the Barbarians, and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), where the desert regimes of Mother and Zero reign. *Passion*, like *Infernal Desire Machines*, is keenly interested in issues of gender and power, a novel "in which the fender has been cut away from the biological body" (Gamble 155). But its vision of liberating the subject from the gendered body is quite different from – and indeed more optimistic than – the kind of liberation on offer in *Infernal Desire Machines*. Further, *Passion*'s political frame of reference, as Sarah Gamble writes, is specifically American, the cultural anxiety it reflects rooted in "religious fundamentalism, dogmatic, dogged individualism" (155). *Infernal Desire Machines*, on the other hand, registers a sensed shift in British governmental and economic policy from the organized welfare statism of the postwar years to a society that strikingly resembles the neoliberal state Britain will become under Thatcher, prefigured in the novel as a kind of libidinal economy; for, in *Infernal Desire Machines*, this tension is worked out on the planes of sexuality and desire and the regulation thereof. The article focuses, therefore, on these issues, working through the regime change in terms of social scientific discourses on sex. *Infernal Desire Machines* approaches these discourses with ambivalence, as forms of 'efficient' human management that instrumentalize and rationalize sex and the body.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the German sociologist Max Weber ascribed the rationalization of modern life to the cultural dissemination of bureaucratic practices. Later, Theodor Adorno developed the notion of "the administered life," "in

which the values of equivalency and instrumentality associated with instrumental rationality and the calculative concerns of capitalism expanded into every fold of human existence" (Hancock 2). As the century wore on, notions of social efficiency and social management continued to preoccupy theorists, with Jean-François Lyotard writing in 1984 that all forms of knowledge, now, are oriented towards the goal of efficiency. Philip Hancock explains that managerialism is a cultural ideology oriented "towards the apparent amelioration of some of our most pressing personal concerns" (14), and whose influence can be read, for example, across the vast range of lifestyle magazines available to us, and which encourage us as readers to ensure our everyday lives are "'well-planned', 'controlled', 'efficient', and 'effective'" (13).

In *A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality*, Gail Hawkes elaborates on the ways in which the two regimes of modern subject formation, efficiency and self-actualization, are brought together by, and hinge on, sex. She argues that, for Weber "and others since, a singular feature of the spirit of capitalism is asceticism – the conscious denial of pleasure [and this] 'frequently' [takes] the form of reordering aspects of human behavior" (18). Sex and sexuality – the aggregate of customs, habits, institutions, and discourses surrounding sexual behavior – suffer, according to Weber (and Hawkes), from the modern injunction to rationalize. Hawkes's study traces the roots of the scientific study of sex in capitalism's 'ascetic' spirit, from which also comes the efficiency movement. At the height of the efficiency movement in the early part of the twentieth century, "the [Taylorist] strategy of observing and timing body movements," she writes, extended "beyond the production line into every aspect of factory life … The diets and drinking habits of the workers [come] under scrutiny, as [do] the patterns of their sexual and

emotional lives" (78). The "real kernel of life" that Weber identifies represents the "disturbing potential for excess" of sexual behavior, and so the Taylorist model of efficiency seeks to neutralize this disturbing potential by "offer[ing] the possibility for the direction [and legitimation] of heterosexual desire" in the family (78). After the Second World War, sexologists like Kinsey and Masters and Johnson extended earlier projects to liberalize heterosexual sex.

For Hawkes, rationality has replaced religion in the twentieth century as the central ordering framework that "gives some order and meaning to actions" and provides "psychic certainty" (28). And in the mid-twentieth century, according to Hawkes, there was a shift in perspective: instead of fearing for their spiritual well-being, modern subjects have become anxious that they will fall below the standards demanded by sexual efficiency – that they cannot "keep up" with the Joneses. As various theorists have noted – including Hawkes, Frank Mort (2000), Annie Potts (2002) and Annamarie Jagose (2012) – by the mid-century and even before, sexology displaced the "goal" of sex from procreation to the orgasm. Modern sexology's role, therefore, "is to teach us the most efficient means" of achieving this goal, and it thus becomes another mechanism of streamlining the social body (Hawkes 73). Following from this, this article reads Carter's *Infernal Desire Machines* as registering the way sexuality has been subject to expert scrutiny by social scientists – in this case sexologists and sex therapists – and the way the ethos of the efficiently managed sex life has become prevalent in the popular imagination.

In the interwar period – and, in fact, well into the 1950s – "marriage" manuals popularized an instrumental model of sex theorized by sexologists like Havelock Ellis

and eugenicists like Karl Pearson. The most enduring of the writers of these early marriage manuals is Marie Stopes, whose *Enduring Passion* (1928) went into eight printings, the final edition published in 1956. The popularity of Stopes's work even after the Second World War ensured that notions of social and sexual efficiency were diffused into the popular imagination; whether and to what extent people adopted actual techniques is less important than that these notions helped to shape the ways we have thought – and still think – about sex and sexuality.

The behaviorist, instruction-manual aspects of Stopes's work was retained in later sexological writings, the most influential of these led by Alfred Kinsey, and, later, William Masters and Virginia Johnson. Kinsey's first report on *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) sold 200,000 copies in the first two months of its being released. His main mode of gathering data was through interviews, gathering information on the physical aspects of sexual behaviors. He was less interested in what his subjects had to say about their sexual emotions as he felt these accounts were unreliable as data: his project was conceived as taxonomy and relied on statistical analysis. That he was committed to "precision" helps to explain why he confined his analysis of sexual behavior to contact that culminated in orgasm. In so doing, Kinsey instituted what various historians of sexology call the orgasmic standard, or the orgasmic imperative.

If it is at all possible to measure the importance of a work based on the moral outrage it causes amongst certain factions of the populace, Kinsey's studies were groundbreaking when they were published in the 1950s. They provided a sort of lexicon against which people could measure themselves and, in some cases, alleviate anxieties about the normality of their sexual appetites. At the same time, Kinsey's investment in

physical rather than affective experiences of sex – indeed, his determination to separate the two – conveniently silences discussions about the ways culture shapes sexual experience, shutting down any possibility of social change. He may have been talking to people about sex, but still in a very circumscribed way. His strategy allowed for an understanding of sexual behavior as something that could be rationally understood, perfected, made more efficient. Sexual life, too, is rational, ordered, and clean.

In the 1950s, William Masters and Virginia Johnson began their physiological studies of sex that they pursued well into the 1990s. Their first publications, also their best-known – *Human Sexual Response* (1966) and *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970) – were published, incidentally, around the same time as *Infernal Desire Machines* and *Heroes and Villains*. The most striking difference between Kinsey's and Masters and Johnson's studies was the changed role of the study participants. Kinsey's interviews were here replaced by a fully-fitted laboratory with men and women hooked up to various gadgets and sensors that measured the changes in their bodies as they performed various sexual acts. Masters and Johnson's studies set a (sexual) standard for participation: participants had to be able to orgasm during heterosexual intercourse and also to masturbate to orgasm. Orgasm, that is, like in Kinsey's study, was the measure of sex. They developed a four-stage model of sexual response and applied this model to men and women both, stressing the sameness of and parallels between male and female sexual response. In so doing, their work raises a similar sort of problem as Kinsey's does: it posits sex as neutral, a great leveller. Stripped of affect, sex in Masters and Johnson became apolitical, merely a biological function measured via sensors. As Paul Robinson points out, these contraptions could very well be "prototypes of the kind of sexual

appliance that will eventually join the toaster and the garbage disposal as standard equipment in every American home" (144). The point here is that Masters and Johnson conceived of sex as something to be managed. And while their heuristic approach forced readers in the late 1960s and early 1970s to confront "the physical fact" of their sexuality, their emphasis on the orgasm as the only measure of sexual experience also alienated sex from the body (Robinson 178). Sex here becomes labor, "appropriately, carried out in the presence of, or aided by, machines" (178). Their studies also set in motion the trend of sexual entrepreneurialism, as their two major works stressed above all the most efficient means of achieving orgasm, and may be read as "the *Consumer Reports*" of sexology (190). Their work, in essence, performs a dual function: it is a kind of market research of what turns people on and gets them off (an assertion supported by the fact that *Playboy* helped to fund their sexological research), and it turns this information into advice, couched in the language of science. In Masters and Johnson, sex becomes something to consume rather than something that produces a bond between two people. Lifestyle replaces affect. In any event, the very notion of a laboratory for the study of sex, with naked subjects hooked up via wires to whirring machines, seems already to be a Carterian vision, and this scene is exactly what Carter (re)produces in Doctor Hoffman's lair in *Infernal Desire Machines*.

Like much of Carter's writing, *Infernal Desire Machines* expresses something essential about the culture out of which it came — about those "tumultuous and kinetic times, the times of actualized desire," as Desiderio, the novel's narrator, says (4). By the early 1970s in Britain, the notion of centralized government was increasingly worn away by an emerging ethic of "individual responsibility, rationality, and local control" (Tratner

14). For a writer like Carter, however, ever critical of institutions as loci of power, by 1972 the erosion of the post-war consensus had been a long time coming. In fact, the bleakness of her novels published from the mid-1960s – particularly the 'Bristol trilogy' comprising *Shadow Dance* (1966), *Several Perceptions* (1968), and *Love* (1971) – already suggests an ambivalence about the optimism of the social consensus after World War Two and also of the radicalism of the decade. These earlier novels are characterised by their radical proximity to the characters, a too-closeness that puts everything out of focus, so that we see everything through the characters' point of view and yet can glean little from it. The narratives are hyperreal, too sharp, so that the characters seem to navigate a Bristol that is more desperate dreamscape than city. While *Infernal Desire Machines*, like *Heroes and Villains* and *Passion*, is more straightforwardly dystopian in its cosmos, it communicates an anxiety very like that which characterises the Bristol trilogy.

The story opens at a moment of rupture; the old government is on the wane, a "model of efficiency," led by a Minister of Determination whose "political philosophy had the non-dynamic magnificence of contrapuntal, pre-classical music; he described to me a grooved, interlocking set of institutions governed by the notion of a great propriety. He called it his theory of 'names and functions'" (20). For the Minister, the world contains "a finite set of objects and a finite set of their combinations and therefore a list could be made of all possible distinct forms which were logically viable" (20). The Minister's challenger, the eponymous Doctor Hoffman, strives, on the other hand, to liberate "the streets from the tyranny of directions," to actualize his philosophy of subjectivism, and to objectify (that is, to make real) desire (31). As Desiderio tells us,

"His main principles were indeed as follows: everything it is possibly to imagine can also exist," and the Doctor's programme is to bring these possibilities into existence (110). The risk involved, that reality is subject to change according to individual desire, is tempered by the Doctor's "set of samples," which his former mentor, The Professor, carries around as a travelling peep-show (200). The set of samples, at least when Desiderio first sees them, are lifelike waxworks which depict sexual and/or violent scenes often animated by a clockwork mechanism. The samples give structure to that radical subjectivity otherwise likely to take over; they are in fact "models" of desire, and if they are destroyed, as they are in the course of the novel, "desires must take whatever form they please" (200). While *Passion* is concerned with deconstructing gender and the body and rebuilding a freer subjectivity, *Infernal Desire Machines* is interested rather in the management and instrumentalization of bodies, of desire.

It is possible to read into these two regimes various allegories: the turn from structuralism to poststructuralism, for instance, or else, as Carter herself told Lorna Sage, "a dialectic between reason and passion" or even, as Linden Peach argues, a rewriting of the Oedipus story (qtd. in Gamble, 117). The most compelling of these alternatives is Sarah Gamble and Susan Rubin Suleiman's contention that Doctor Hoffman's regime of totally liberated desire stands for the counterculture of the 1960s, and particularly the Surrealists. Hoffman's 'speculation that desire might power a revolution is what makes the novel Surrealist, since the Doctor "scientifically literalis[es] the Surrealist dictum that desire makes the world go round" (Gamble 131). According to this reading, Hoffman's revolution, like that of the Surrealists, fails to materialize because "[i]t was simply never going to happen, for in fact the choice between realism and fantasy is merely illusory"

(Gamble 130). Such a revolution is not possible, according to Gamble, because it simply makes recourse to, "merely shores up," the system it hopes to overthrow, but which in fact sustains it (131). Gamble's reading is convincing, but it is also possible to read the tension between order and chaos at the heart of *Infernal Desire Machines* in a different way. I argue that Hoffman's world is what comes after the revolution of the 1960s fails to materialize, that its vision of the world already resembles the neoliberal state Britain will become under Thatcher, whose logos is that of libidinal economy, of accelerationism.

David Harvey broadly accepts "the view that the long postwar boom, from 1945 to 1973, was built upon a … configuration [that] can reasonably be called Fordist-Keynesian" (124). He writes that, in the period from 1965 to 1973, "the inability of Fordism and Keynesianism to contain the inherent contradictions of capitalism became more apparent. On the surface, these difficulties could be best captured in one word: rigidity" (141-2). In *Infernal Desire Machines*, the Minister is the representative of this rational, rigidly organized state, presiding over a city of planned, tree-lined avenues and piazzas maintained by efficient public services; he "had never in all his life felt the slightest quiver of empirical uncertainty" (17). The "almost superhuman" task he sets himself is to count and organize "all possible distinct forms … into a conceptual framework and so form a kind of check list for the verification of all phenomena, instantly available by means of an information retrieval system" (17). Doctor Hoffman's Ambassador (really Albertina, his daughter, and Desiderio's eventual lover) accuses the Minister of attempting to tabulate "every thing you can lay your hands on. In the sacred name of symmetry, you slide them into a series of straightjackets and label them with, oh, my God, what inexpressibly boring labels!" (35). Doctor Hoffman, for his part, seeks

"absolute authority to establish a regime of total liberation" (38). His world works according to the logic of libidinal economy, in which all that seems to matter "is that desire, like money, should circulate as quickly and polyvalently as possible" (Bennett 110), and it looks quite like Harvey's description of the break up of the Fordist-Keynesian postwar boom: "a period of rapid change, flux, and uncertainty" (124). According to Benjamin Noys, the theoretical moment of libidinal economy is part of a broader set of concepts called accelerationism. Accelerationism suggests that "we come to terms with capitalism as a dynamic of increasing value," that we become "hyper-capitalist subjects … to speed-up beyond the limits of production and so rupture the limit of capital itself" (Noys x). As it is conceived by Jean-François Lyotard, libidinal economy seeks to bring about "the uninhibited circulation or free exchange of the currency of desire in an economy of spending without saving – not energy or libido locked up in an object, constituting that object's 'natural' value, but the free-flowing desire that Freud describes as the 'polymorphous perversity' … of childhood sexuality" (Bennett 109). Practically, Hoffman's assault on the Minister's city consists of having "giant generators [sending] out a series of seismic vibrations which made great cracks in the hitherto immutable surface of the time and space equation we had informally formulated in order to realize our city" (*IDM* 17). In *Passion*, Eve's "polymorphous perversity" leads to rebirth and renewal. Hoffman's use of such perversity is instrumental; his is a world in which desire is released, in which it runs free, circulating and reproducing itself.

For Lyotard, there is no sense in trying to locate a revolutionary subject outside of capital, because there is no outside of capital. In *Libidinal Economy*, therefore, Lyotard's

political activists are passive: they abandon protest and critique and become conductors of energy – what he calls "force". In order to effect change, we are meant to give ourselves up "to the bourgeois revolutionary process in the hope that exacerbating capitalism's own revolutionary tendencies, rather than seeking to reform them – that is accelerating, not obstructing, exchange or the circulation of money/desire – might somehow precipitate an as-yet unimaginable transformation, if not actually an end, of capitalism" (Bennett 109-110). In the introduction to their *Accelerationist Reader*, Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian maintain that "the only radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, or critique, nor to await its demise at the hands of its own contradictions, but to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies" (4). And so libidinal economy is not interested in critiquing or disrupting the status quo; Lyotard, for instance, is merely interested in conduction. He enjoins us to make our bodies "good conductors" of libidinal intensities, to "[l]et everything go … without ever *knowing* whether it will work or not" (Lyotard 259). In other words, the project gives up any pretense to immediate social responsibility, which makes sense insofar as libidinal economy and accelerationism are theorized in part as responses to and reactions against social-democratic projects accelerationists see as "capitalism's default ideology" (Noys 11). Accelerationism, writes Noys, holds out "the promise of a new acceleration, driven by faith in new productive forces that come online and disrupt [this] ideological humanism" (11). They "reject this 'humanism' by embracing dehumanization" (11). Iterations of accelerationism in the 1990s, for example, take this notion to its logical conclusion, "rigorously abandon[ing] any humanist residue," striving instead "for a new post-human state beyond any form of the subject, excepting the

delirious processes of capital itself" (Noys x). If we can read the Minister's work as analogous to that of postwar social scientists, whose work helped to underpin the policies of the welfare state, Hoffman is a different kind of social scientist, a libidinal economist whose only dictum is that we make ourselves "good conducting bodies" of that "force [that] works towards the eradication of all subjectivity," of violence, which "consists entirely in non-construction, non-edification (uselessness), in sweeping away defences, opening up routes, meanings, minds" (Lyotard 261). He seeks out people's desires and makes them real, multiplies them so that desire eventually begets more desire. But Hoffman's type of social science abstracts the citizenry – living, breathing people – in the interests of maximizing efficiency and stimulating the economy – in this case, a free market of desires. Put in terms of sexological regime changes, the Minister is more akin to the classifying and rationalizing impulse of Kinsey's studies, whereas Doctor Hoffman's activities are closer to those of Masters and Johnson, whose studies helped to rationalize and marketize sex. Carter's novel, then, articulates a rationalizing impulse, an imperative to be more efficient, in social scientific discourse and the discourse of social policy, articulating the ways these impulses have infiltrated even sexual life. In *Infernal Desire Machines*, the specific effect of this is, as we shall see, the instrumentalization of desire.

The unnamed city besieged by Doctor Hoffman's forces is "solid, drab" and thrives on trade (15). Desiderio tells us that "it was thickly, obtusely masculine" (15). This is an unusual formulation, as cities, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, are typically associated with the female body and, more specifically, to female irrationality and hysteria. Elizabeth Wilson suggests that because the "city offers

untrammelled sexual experience," writers in the twentieth century "definitely and clearly [pose] the presence of women as a problem of order" (6). Desiderio and the Minister's city is, like the modern city described by Wilson, always-already associated with the threat of irrational and uncontainable sexuality, precisely because it is so clean and orderly: it is repressed, holding something back. And so while Desiderio's city is "rich, even if it [is] ugly," it is "just a little nervous, all the same," afraid to "peer over its well-upholstered shoulder in case it glimpsed the yellow mountains louring far towards the north, atavistic reminders of the interior of a continent which inspired a wordless fear" (16). It is truly the city of the Minister of Determination, who himself "had become the city. He had become the invisible walls of the city; in himself, he represented the grand totality of the city's resistance" (28).

Early on in the narrative, as Desiderio describes Hoffman's escalating assault on the rational order of the city and the Minister's concomitant tightening of controls on the population, he gestures already to the Ministerial regime's potential for brutality. The Determination Police, tasked with Reality Testing people and objects for their authenticity, make Desiderio wary, "for their ankle-length, truculently belted coats of black leather, their low-crowned, wide-brimmed fedoras and their altogether too highly polished boots woke in me an uncomfortable progression of associations. They looked as if they had been recruited wholesale from a Jewish nightmare" (22). Hawkes writes that underpinning the idea of rational action is the notion of informed choice, specifically, "the informed (free) choice of means to a desired end" (103). This entails, she argues, a "self-conscious denial of the existence, or even relevance of moral content" (102). In the context of sexology, for example, "the dissolution of the irrational elements of morality in

rational action" allows sexologists to speak about the pursuit of pleasure at all costs (103). This is why Kinsey's all-sex-is-good-sex relativizing approach, for example, can allow him to write somewhat wistfully that a "third possible interpretation of sex as a normal biologic function, acceptable in whatever form it is manifested, has hardly figured in either general or scientific discussions," and that all extra-marital sex "of the unmarried male" has instead been restricted by the English-American legal codes, characterized as, for example, "rape, statutory rape … incest … assault and battery," and so on (264). Indeed. It is not difficult to see, here, how "a single-minded belief in the efficacy and legitimacy of rational action, and the silencing of the irrational and affective" can encourage "a condition of amorality" (Hawkes 103). In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman writes that the "civilising process is, among other things, a process … of emancipating the desiderata of rationality from interference of ethical norms or moral prohibitions" (qtd. in Hawkes, 103). In this condition of amorality, he argues, the Holocaust is an explainable outcome. Thus, the Determination Police in *Infernal Desire Machines*. If, for Desiderio, they evoke SS officers, it is because the ideal of rationality and efficiency they work towards at any cost can easily – and frighteningly – become an end in itself. As one of the Minister's physicists learns, too much rationality can be dangerous: "I suspect," says Desiderio, "that Drosselmeier had unwittingly exposed himself to an overdose of reality and it had destroyed his reason" (23). The more counter-weapons the Minister devises in his quest to fix reality, the more swiftly the Doctor's research laboratories restructure "their own prototype molecule" to get around them and continue to proliferate and project the actualized desires of the populace (23). And desire is the crucial element in Carter's novel.

Desiderio professes to be unutterably "bored" by Doctor Hoffman's phantasms (11). He relates Hoffman's alterations rapidly, in a dense flurry of descriptive language: first there were the cloud palaces, after which appeared the chanting pillars that changed back into street lamps "until, with night, they changed to silent flowers. Giant heads in the helmets of conquistadors sailed up like sad, painted kites over the giggling chimney pots. Hardly anything remained the same for more than one second," he writes, and his language reflects this (18). But in spite of "so much complexity – a complexity so rich it can hardly be expressed in language," Desiderio is bored (11). There is one phantom, however, that "obscurely trouble[s] him because nothing about it [is] familiar": an alluring young woman "in a négligé made of a fabric the colour and texture of the petals of poppies which clung about her but did not conceal her quite transparent flesh, so that the exquisite filigree of her skeleton was revealed quite clearly" (25). The woman, in erotic pose, never moves when Desiderio sees her, only shimmers slightly, but leaves him messages "written in lipstick on my dusty windowpane. BE AMOROUS! she exhorted one night and, another night, BE MYSTERIOUS! Some nights later, she scribbled, DON'T THINK, LOOK; and shortly after that, she warned me: WHEN YOU BEGIN TO THINK, YOU LOSE THE POINT" (26). If these injunctions look familiar, it is perhaps because it sounds a bit like the casual and superficial cheeriness characteristic of sexological advice: above all, remember to be sexual. In typical Carter fashion, too, there is something ham about these injunctions: the dichotomy between rationality and the actualized desire offered by Hoffman is conspicuously laid out. The "point," one supposes, is desire, erotic desire, self-actualizing through sex, and it is a motif that crops up in much of Carter's writing, particularly in texts like *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and

The Bloody Chamber (1979), which narrate female coming of age. Desiderio's vision as we later learn is of Albertina, Doctor Hoffman's daughter, secret agent and sometime emissary, who appears throughout the narrative in various disguises.

Desiderio's journey begins in earnest when the Minister's machines register "a significant analogy": "they posited certain correspondences between the activities of a proprietor of a certain peep-show who had operated his business upon the pier at the seaside resort of S." and Doctor Hoffman (40). Desiderio's mission, then, as assigned by the Minister, is to assassinate Doctor Hoffman as discreetly as possible. He leaves the city and, at the seaside resort of S., finds the peep-show and its proprietor, a blind, old man. As he enters the ramshackle tent, the old man tells him to "take your fill of the wonders of the world" (43). The wonders of the world, Desiderio learns, as he looks through the viewers of the peep-boxes, are limited to the human body. The first exhibit, "I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE" comprises "the legs of a woman, raised and open as if ready to admit a lover" (44). Gazing between the legs, Desiderio sees "the dark red and purple crenellations surrounding the vagina[, which act] as a frame for a perfectly round hole through which the viewer glimpsed the moist, luxuriant landscape of the interior" (44). This is not a euphemism: the landscape is really a landscape, made up of a "vista of semi-tropical forest where amazing fruits hung on the trees … Small, brilliant birds trilled silently on the branches; animals of exquisite shapes and colours, among them unicorns, giraffes and herbivorous lions, cropped up buttercups and daisies" (44). The way to paradise, this exhibit suggests, is between a woman's legs. Annie Potts argues in *The Science/Fiction of Sex* that sexology, in its various forms, has helped in the post-war period to generate an atmosphere in which we can only manage to express our "true (and

replete) self" through sexual satisfaction: the coming-of-age journey in the post-war period is one of "sexual self-actualization" (247). If the first exhibit suggests this, Exhibit Two: THE ETERNAL VISTAS OF LOVE, shows Desiderio himself – as he truly is, perhaps – reflected in the eyes of a lover: "all I could see were two eyes looking at me … in the pupils I could see, reflected in two discs of mirrors, my own eyes, very greatly magnified by the lenses of the machine" (45). The third exhibit is made up of ice cream sundaes shaped "so that the resemblance to a pair of female breasts was almost perfect," the female breasts a sweet treat, something to consume (44). This marks the exhibit's turning point, for its placement in the line of peep-boxes gives a hint of what is to come. The exhibits that follow are more disturbing: the headless body of a mutilated woman in lingerie in one; in another, the woman's head, suspended in the air "with no strings or hooks in sight," her mouth dripping blood and her features wearing "a hideous expression of resignation" (46). The peep-show's wonders of the world exhibit runs rapidly through the injunctions and dangers of sexological discourse: first, we must find pleasure (or paradise) through sex and find ourselves through sex. Following this progression, we begin to consume sex as a commodity, as an element – *the* element – in the reflexive project of the self. And the latter two exhibits show the violence that underpins the commodification of the female body, particularly in the "post-human" context of accelerationism, in which the subject becomes a mere conductor of desire. Following the (sexo)logical progression, sex becomes a consumer product whose correct enactment is key to the modern lifestyle; we consume and objectify our lovers, and Carter here shows how this process occurs within an already established and uneven power relationship. As she writes in *The Sadeian Woman*, "Flesh comes to us out of history…. Sexuality, in

short, is never expressed in a vacuum" (11). And in *Infernal Desire Machines*, we see how taking this for granted can be deadly for women. The body of the woman is not just mutilated; it has been dissected: "the right breast had been partially segmented and hung open to reveal two surfaces of meat as bright and false as the plaster sirloins which hang in toy butcher's shops," an image which resonates with Frank Mort's description of the female body under the sexologist's gaze – dissected to reveal only erogenous zones (45). Stephen Heath argues that there "is a capitalism of the sexual and we live under it: a whole investment in the sexual as sex which allows its stable instrumentalization and manufacture and circulation, with us as sexual agents as we are economic agents … Fetishism of commodities, fetishism of sexes" (149). Fetish is an apt word, for it suggests part of the whole, the part standing instead of the whole, a kind of frustrated synecdoche. The woman in the peep-show is eyes or head or breasts, but never all at once. Similarly, when Desiderio later visits The House of Anonymity, the women working in the brothel are wholly instrumentalized:

> They had been reduced by the rigorous discipline of their vocation to the undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female. This ideational femaleness took amazingly different shapes though its nature was not that of Woman; when I examined them more closely, I saw that none of them were any longer, or might never have been, woman. All, without exception, passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simple humanity. They were sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable, and part brute. (132)

Prostitution may be the oldest profession in the world, but the creatures that Desiderio encounters in the Bestial Room are wholly modern. They have brought together sex,

consumption and consumerism in a perfect and terrible symbiosis. Sex is not merely their job; it is a vocation, a sort of metaphysical imperative. Whatever they were before now, Desiderio tells us, they are reduced to an essence of femaleness, of female sexuality. Sex is all they are. They are not merely "emanations of male desire itself at its most monstrous," as Gamble argues (129). They are sexological objects under libidinal economy, in whose psyches sexual functioning is the "essential ingredient for satisfaction," and they have instrumentalized their bodies so that they are no longer flesh, but part clockwork, part vegetable, and part brute (Segal 101).

In her discussion of the "liberalization of heterosexuality" in the 1960s, Hawkes describes its "relationship to the commodification of desire"; the organization of sex and sexuality now reflects the features of flexible accumulation, particularly in its emphasis on "choice" (104). If Fordist production methods demanded a certain kind of person, a self-rationalizing individual who can regulate his impulses, a "world dominated by the requirements of flexible accumulation demands another 'new type of person'" who is engaged in Giddens's reflexive project of the self, "which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, [and] takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems" (qtd. in Hawkes, 115). This shedding of old selves like skins, the injunction to spend, is that of libidinal economy, part of the dynamics of the throwaway society beginning to be evident in the 1960s. At the same time, this apparent sea-change has little effect on the prevailing orthodoxies, the fundamental order of the way things are, so that the so-called liberalization of sex amounts to little more than its commodification – a market of sex, evident in the continuing proliferation of self-help and sex manuals. As David Bennett

writes, “the desire to spend for its own sake, which is essentially the desire to desire … is evidence of capitalism’s success in marketing a new idea of the mass consumer – not as *homo oeconomicus* … but as *homo desiderans* or *homo sexualis*, a subject in whom desire exceeds reason and is always in excess of any potential object” (111-112). The shift, then, from the rational-planning model of sex (orientated towards the family and the nation and overseen by the post-war social scientist) to the consumer-choice model of sex (over which the libidinal economist presides) is little more than a shift in emphasis, a diversionary tactic that works to conceal resilient hierarchies of power. The injunction to choose is similar to the injunction to “speak” that Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality*. Consuming, then, is also form of “telling” who you are and, like sex today, it is not the road to freedom; it’s a trap.

Holding true to the picaresque form, *Infernal Desire Machines* is episodic, consisting of eight separate, self-contained episodes and Desiderio’s introduction. The episode in which appears The House of Anonymity is “The Erotic Traveller,” the story of the Count. The Count is a Sadeian figure who thrives on the disorder of Nebulous Time, which takes hold after Doctor Hoffman’s set of samples is destroyed in a landslide. According to the Professor, Nebulous Time is “a period of absolute mutability when only reflected rays and broken trajectories of an entirely hypothetic source of light fitfully reveal a continually shifting surface, like the surface of the water, yet a water which is only a reflective skin and has neither depth or volume” (99), a description strikingly similar to that of Lyotard’s evocation of the world’s “Great Libidinal Skin,” that continually moving, density-less Moebius band which has “not got two sides, but only one, and therefore neither exterior nor interior” (3). Without the set of samples to

structure – which is to say delimit – the possible representations of the world, desires materialize at whim, making fantasy worlds, like a fictional coast of Africa or a tribe of god-fearing, self-mutilating horses. The samples serve "as patterns or templates from which physical objects and real events may be evolved," the matter out of which the rest of the world can be represented (95). They are a sort of inverse of the Minister's computer bank: the projects of both the Minister and the Doctor involve cataloguing the "finite set of objects" in the world and making, on the one hand a list and, on the other, a set of samples, to represent these (22). The Minister uses his catalogue as a way to set boundaries. Having "decided he could only keep a strict control of his actualities by adjusting their names to agree with them perfectly," he institutes a programme he calls the "Rectification of Names," so, "you understand, that no shadows would fall between the word and the thing described" (193). The Doctor, conversely, as libidinal economist, wants to use his set of samples to produce and to proliferate desires. On the surface, these seem to be opposing forces, but they are both modes of organization. As Desiderio says, Doctor Hoffman "might know the nature of the inexhaustible plus, but, all the same, he was a totalitarian" (207). The Count, for his part, thrives in Nebulous Time and appears to live Hoffman's dream of totally liberated desire. He is in fact a danger to Hoffman's project because he is an absolute negative, like Zero in *Passion*, who pursues his own degradation and that of his wives. While the Minister wants to regulate and delimit and the Doctor wants to regulate and generate, the Count wants only annihilation. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter writes that, "The annihilation of the self and the resurrection of the body, to die in pain and painfully return from death, is the sacred drama of the Sadeian orgasm. In this drama, flesh is used instrumentally, to provoke these spasmodic

visitations of dreadful pleasure" (150). His instrumental use of the flesh is what leads Desiderio to suspect the Count is really Doctor Hoffman in disguise. His disordered, destructive energy is strong enough, in Nebulous Time, to flatten the Doctor's castle "by merely breathing on it and burst all the test tubes only with laughing at them"; the force of his conviction, which Hoffman calls the "principle of the persistence of vision" – crucial to the his actualizing of desires – is stronger than the rational order that inheres in the projects of the Minister and of Hoffman (205).

For underpinning both of their projects is a cool rationality; even the romantic stone walls of Hoffman's "Wagnerian castle" (196) hold a vision of "domestic peace" where "everything was safe. Everything was ordered. Everything was secure" (197). And far beneath, holding up – literally – this domesticity is his laboratory, reached by going down in a "businesslike electric elevator" (209). "Where the dungeons should have been," Desiderio tells us, "there were white-tiled corridors soundlessly floored with black rubber and lit by strip lighting far more brightly than day" (209). The Doctor's vision of disorder, then, is supported by rational efficiency: antiseptic corridors, white-coated technicians, steel contraptions quietly whirring away everywhere. In the Doctor's lab, Desiderio sees what's at the heart of the project: the reality modifying machines, which "precipitate" "essence of being," a process that "spontaneously generates the germinal molecule of an uncreated alternative. That is, the germinal molecule of objectified desire" (210). These, in turn, are powered by the "desire generators," "love pens" in which Desiderio sees "a hundred of the best-matched lovers in the world, twined in a hundred of the most fervent embraces passion could devise" (214). The Doctor tells Desiderio that they are paired in the mesh cubicles so that they can see and hear one another "and so, if

necessary, receive constant refreshment from visual and audial stimuli" (214). They are also fed hormones intravenously to shore up waning desire. Desire, here, is what powers the Doctor's machines; according to the Doctor, it is generated "by four legs in a bed" (203). Typically, we think of desire being terminated when we bring about the thing we desire – sex with a "best-matched" lover, for instance. But here, consummating desire actually generates more of it, which becomes an energy force in itself. Here, the lovers' "plentiful secretions" are collected as essence of being, to be "precipitated" in the reality modifying machines with the ostensible aim of liberating desire, the unconscious, and, "By the liberation of the unconscious, we shall, of course, liberate man" (208). Here is libidinal economy at work: the injunction to spend, spend, spend, the acceleration/precipitation of already-existing capitalist processes is the only way, according to Hoffman and other libidinal economists, to transform society.

Hoffman's regime of total liberation comes about once "concretized desire" becomes "autonomous, free-form, [and] self-promulgat[ing]" (212). In other words, when "the world exists only as a medium in which we execute our desires," when desire begets more desire (35). Hoffman's liberated world is analogous to what, according to Michael Tratner, happens in late capitalism: when, moving beyond the Keynesian solution of deficit spending to stabilize the economy, "the system seeks to satisfy *all* desires in all people simultaneously" (41). What Tratner is describing here is again the logic of libidinal economy: Lyotard writes that on the great libidinal body, that Moebius strip that is the world, "desire as displacement of forces … knows no 'no'…. not one of these operations is a negation or a denial, each proceeds from the investment of the libido alone" (163). In a libidinal economy, there is always and only fluidity, the energetic

circulation of desire. In Carter's novel, this is worked out as the spent desire of the lovers in the pens is repackaged and re-entered in a system of circulation, in turn producing more desire. Hoffman, in fact, is merely liberating desire to channel it into a form of extreme consumerism, in which people's indulgence of their whims literally remakes their worlds. His desire generators act as stimuli "to consumer demand, a way of increasing the total amount of desire" (Tratner 29). The Doctor's philosophy of liberation is merely a tactical shift; as Desiderio tells us, "I could not see why a man like him should want to liberate man so much. I could not see how he would have got that notion of liberation inside his skull. I was sure he only wanted power" (209). As Benjamin Noys points out, spending for its own sake – drunk, *jouissive* participation in consumer capitalism – in order to accelerate capitalism's revolutionary tendencies can hardly be described as a break from capitalism. For him, the crucial political question is "how can we create change out of the 'bad new' without replicating it?" (10). The libidinal economist's solution would be to "replicate more because replication will lead to the 'implosion' of capital" (10). Crucially, though, for Noys, replication "reinforces the dominance of capitalism, leaving us within capital as the unsurpassable horizon of our time" (10). This is illustrated also in *Passion*, whose landscape is perhaps what's beyond the limit, but in which there are residues of capitalist configurations of power – evident in Mother's enclave or Zero's ranch. If *Passion*'s narrative trajectory can be said to be more optimistic it is only because the characters try a different tack, liberating the subject from the gendered body after the strategy of accelerating has failed. To accelerate, then, is to concede, is to be controlled. As Linden Peach suggests, while Hoffman serves as a foil to

the Minister, he is "also the embodiment of capitalist control of desire through media technology" (90).

Foucault writes that, during late capitalism, organizing labor and sexuality does not rely any longer on violence and control; "it relies instead on a multiple channelling into the controlled circuits of the economy – on what has been called … desublimation" (qtd. in Tratner, 21). As the world becomes articulated through these circuits of desire, "consumption becomes the driving force of the entire social order" (Tratner 53). According to Foucault, when we speak of sex nowadays, we speak of "a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex [is] not something one simply judged; it [is] a thing one administer[s]" (24). Which is where sexology comes in. Sexology directs desire into these controlled circuits of the economy, channelling sex into the reflexive project of the self – creating the self as a marketable commodity, shaping a "lifestyle." Sexuality and consumption become intimately tied together, leading to a growing market in sex and the increasing promotion of disembodied eroticism in which people-as-consumers can go erotic window-shopping. Sex is estranged from the body and made strange; it becomes a consumer product whose correct enactment is key to the modern lifestyle. Hawkes writes that in the late twentieth century, the rhetoric of good housekeeping is replaced by that of good sex-making, represented by "orgasmic efficiency and the management of erotic pleasures" (121). In *Infernal Desire Machines*, Hoffman engages in the making-strange of sex from the body. He blurs the lines between scientist and pornographer, because, for Carter, in pornography, "the abstraction of the flesh involves the mystification of the flesh. As it

reduces the actors in the sexual drama to instruments of pure function, so the pursuit of pleasure becomes in itself a metaphysical quest. The pornographer … becomes a metaphysician…. [A]s he says so, the world vanishes" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 16). And Hoffman does make the world vanish, behind continuous "phantasmagoric redefinition[s]" of what a world is (17).

In the Minister's world – and the one that Desiderio puts back together by murdering the Doctor and Albertina and destroying the lab – "the golden bowl is not broken … It is round as a cake and everyone may have a slice of it. A need is nothing like a desire" (207). It is a vision of a fair and ordered society, perhaps a little bit like what the post-war Welfare State aspired to be, where "everybody is relatively contented" but only because "they do not know how to name their desires so the desires do not exist" (207). It is tightly regulated and a little lacking in imagination, but mostly peaceful and fair so long as citizens respect its bounds. Its sinister side is that, in its commitment to rational order and efficiency, such a world's organizing mechanism can become emptied of moral content and so brutal. The new world order that Hoffman proposes runs on an economy of desire, "an and + and world" of "the inexhaustible plus," where anything is possible but nothing is assured; there is no security, no contentment, only a loop of endless consumption (206). Hoffman's world, in fact, shows us the ways "capitalism adapts to various liberations" (Tratner 37).

Writing at the end of the long postwar boom, Carter's novel seems to register a shift from a Fordist-Keynesian configuration to a more flexible regime shaped by the logic of libidinal economy. Noys writes that, in the 1970s, libidinal economy "appeared predictive of the sudden 'acceleration' of cybernetic and financial forces that would form

the basis for neoliberalism" in the late 1970s and early 1980s (7). Using a poetics of libidinal economy, then, the novel anticipates the "enhanced powers of flexibility and mobility" of the neo-liberal economy (Noys 147). In representing the Minister as the figure of the post-war social scientist who gathers facts, analyses social structures, whose work seems, indeed, to consist "essentially in setting a limit to thought," the novel critiques the impulses that underlie his project: efficiency and rationalization (22). This work sets a limit to the imagination and treat citizens as a problem to be solved, rather than as individuals with conflicting needs, desires, and impulses. At the same time, in *Infernal Desire Machines*, this is the model of the world that wins out: for Desiderio, there is something to be said for contentment. The sharper critique, in Carter's novel, is of Doctor Hoffman's regime, which "pen[s] desire in a cage and [says]: 'Look! I have liberated desire!'" (208). The Doctor would liberate the citizens from the security of the Minister's tidy and well-organized city only so they can engage in circuits of consumption, to indulge freely in desire in order to increase consumer libido, to generate more desire. The Doctor's world is our world, where the market runs for itself, commodifying human interaction and abstracting bodies, stripping them down to their economic potentiality, and the novel illustrates the particular effects of such a system on women. While *Infernal Desire Machines* certainly registers "cracks appearing in [the dominant] mode of awareness," that "familiar, post-Enlightenment myth that, through reason, human beings are most positively human," it cannot yet envision a better world (Peach 94, 96). The only projected alternative is the Doctor's project, which is even more dangerous as it is so abstractly inhuman; it seeks to do away with the self altogether. The

novel's end illustrates Carter's feeling that "[r]ationality without humanism founders on itself," and contemporary readers can only hope this is true (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 35).

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